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To Speak The Unspeakable

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Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory and the Perils of Looking Back, by Janice Haaken. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998, 332 pp., $26.00 hardcover.

WOMEN'S MADNESS HAS continually exceeded the attempts of medical science to categorize it. The history of psychiatry is peppered with successive efforts to codify and contain female malaise—hysteria, chlorosis, nervous exhaustion, PMS, chronic fatigue syndrome. Humane impulses lie behind these diagnoses: to acknowledge suffering, to legitimate disability, to name and thereby tame the terror of the unknown, to generate treatment resources and human sympathy. Nonetheless, as Foucault noted, reducing madness to "syndromes" and "symptoms" obliterates the sufferer's subjectivity and discredits her voice as that of unreason.

For the last decade, much of the psychic suffering of American women has been diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and attributed to past experiences of sexual abuse. During this time, childhood sexual abuse and its traumatic consequences have come to serve as a rallying point for second-wave feminism. But recollected sexual abuse has also been the site of acrimonious public debate, vicious professional infighting and unprecedented charges of medical malpractice. Fierce battles rage about the validity of recovered trauma memories, suspect therapeutic techniques and such florid aspects of PTSD as multiple personality disorder.

Janice Haaken courageously enters this contested terrain, offering an exegesis that is both profound and provocative. Lot's wife, turned into salt for the disobedient act of looking back, is Haaken's emblem for transgressive acts of remembering. As she points out, the full story of Lot's family is about much more than patriarchal punishment. So too is the current cultural preoccupation with recollected sexual abuse. Haaken asks: Why women? Why now? How did the survivor movement become so central to feminism in the 1990s? Why did PTSD become the icon of feminist therapists? Why has the treatment of abuse victims become nearly synonymous with feminist therapy? What can the vehement battles over remembered abuse tell us about gender politics at the century's end?

Pillar of Salt is a smart and subtle meditation on questions such as these. Brimming over with heady ideas, it is not a quick read, but it amply repays the time invested. As a therapist and feminist, Haaken speaks from within the professional culture that she observes and analyzes. With an impressive command of psychoanalytic theories, feminist literary theory and critical cultural theory, she probes the ways that private anxieties and pleasures are reworked in the crucible of culture as well as how cultural themes and preoccupations shift in response to emerging material conditions and social pressures. *Pillar of Salt* compares contemporary revelations of childhood abuse to the attempts of women in earlier eras to make known the hidden truths of their experience. It places trauma therapies in the historical array of efforts to manage disturbed and disturbing female behavior.

A CENTRAL THEME of *Pillar of Salt* is that revelations of sexual abuse are a form of storytelling. They draw upon a reservoir of story forms, imagery and plot devices to produce intelligible narratives. The reality of sexual abuse in women's collective history gives rise to shared language for talking about it. And like any form of storytelling, trauma testimony is a social act, shaped by the "social field" in which it takes place. Whether in therapy, in a self-help group, on daytime television, or in a circle of family members, trauma stories are told to and for an audience.

The heart of *Pillar of Salt* is a fascinating examination of women as storytellers. Noting that women have throughout history been bearers of unauthorized or occult knowledge, Haaken analyzes hypnotic trances, seances, automatic writing and spirit mediums, as well as the "bodily storytelling" of hysterical conversion reactions. Such dissociated storytelling is a specifically feminine tradition, she argues, forced upon women by their subordinate position and the "unspeakable" nature of their stories. PTSD, with its amnesias and "recovered" memories, flashbacks, multiple personalities and periods of "spacing out" (i.e., dissociative states), carries this tradition forward. These manifestations of fragmented consciousness can be seen as means to speak the unspeakable, while disavowing the speech act as one's own.

A second purpose of *Pillar of Salt* is a determination to recoup the symbolic dimensions of trauma testimony and sexual abuse. The survivor movement—like political movements more generally—insists on the literal truth of testimonies in order to assert unambiguous moral claims. Haaken seeks to dispel this reliance on unalloyed positivist realism. Drawing on contemporary cognitive psychology, she argues that all memories are shaped in accord with the cues and demands of the circumstances in which they are recalled. Memory is not the psychic equivalent of a videotape; the notion that the mind simply imprints and stores events denies intelligence and creativity in mental life.

For Haaken, reducing sexual abuse to a "traumatogenic" experience with a fixed set of disabling outcomes deflects attention from other meanings the experience might have. Incestuous experiences may be arousing as well as disturbing. Some victims may relish the attention lavished on them or the sense of a special relationship with their abuser. Some may view themselves as ministering to their abuser's unmet emotional needs. Some of the time (perhaps even much of the time) abuse victims do not suffer lifelong damage. None of these possible meanings, of course, absolves the abuser from moral responsibility for his (or her) actions.

Why has childhood sexual abuse become the reigning explanation for so many women's distress? Not, Haaken argues, because of its inevitably devastating effects, but rather because of its social symbolic meanings. Given the reality of sexual abuse, including incest, in women's collective history, intimate invasion of the self is a potent image for women. Testifying to sexual abuse may stand for many things: refusal to suffer in silence; refusal to be bought off; resistance against the legacy of men's sexual transgressions. Childhood sexual abuse has less liberatory symbolic meanings as well. Trauma theory inadvertently reaffirms cultural beliefs about women's greater vulnerability. Further, it bears a troubling continuity with the idea that an unauthorized sexual experience—even if coerced—spoils a woman for life, leaving her irretrievably tainted. As Haaken notes, if all disturbing awarenesses of childhood bodily desire and pleasure are reinterpreted only as clues to possible victimization, then opportunities for exploring pleasurable fantasies, rebellious desires and sexual agency and self-determination are closed down.

FEMINIST SCRUTINY OF medical discourses about women has exposed how expert knowledge props up gender hierarchies and legitimates male power and privilege. Janice Haaken's critical virtuosity places her among the ranks of such distinguished feminist scholars as Carol Groneman, Elizabeth Lunbeck, Emily Martin, Mary Parlee, Elaine Showalter and Leonore Tiefer. But trauma theory is not a province of patriarchal knowledge. The trauma field is largely woman-owned and woman-operated. Its leading lights are women and feminists. Many see trauma theory as the center of the feminist project of reinventing concepts of normality and abnormality. The survivor movement is an offspring of the feminist movement.

Haaken has embarked, in short, on a vexed and perilous project. Readers of *The Women's Review of Books* do not need to be told that feminists' critiques of one another often elicit pained outrage, ad feminam attacks and even trashing. Sauce for the gander seems to turn to poison when ladled onto the goose. Yet we cannot suspend critical engagement with one another's work. Fresh insights come through setting divergent ideas into abrasive interaction.

The struggle over the accuracy of recovered memories has fixated attention on

questions of truth and falsity. Unfortunately, some trauma theorists have been cornered into the posture of defending the truth of every recollection of incest. Haaken argues that the question of factual truth is the wrong question. Although the evidence that memory is influenced by the social context has been seized upon by critics of recovered memory, such evidence need not be inimical to women's interests. Haaken argues that feminists can gain more ground for understanding women's stories by embracing and defending socially organized forms of recollecting. She refuses to be drawn into the true-false binary and insists instead on space for fantasy, legend and myth. Women's collective history of sexual abuse gives it legendary status. The "truth" of a legend is not its historical accuracy, but its "narrative truth" or its revelatory meaning. Clinically and politically, the power of a legendary truth lies in its capacity to uncover the world in which women's thought, action and self-definition take place.

Professional debates about recollected sexual abuse have lapsed into personal vendettas, harassment and name-calling. Some feminist therapists have received death threats; their workplaces have been placarded and their offices obstructed. In such a state of siege, the press toward more extreme claims, more dogmatic slogans and more doctrinaire pronouncements is nearly irresistible. Sexual abuse narratives, Haaken points out, have grown more apocalyptic in recent times: the victims more innocent; the perpetrators more satanic; and the acts more despicable and widespread. In such an overcharged atmosphere, the social field divides into friends and foes. Even measured statements like "It's hard to be sure" can seem traitorous.

Pillar of Salt is an effort to break out of this poisonous cycle, to change the terms of the discourse. It reframes recollected sexual abuse as storytelling and places it in historical perspective. It shifts the focus from individual pathology to considerations of the collective and social dimensions of memory, trauma and sexuality. It replaces the question of truth with questions of meaning. Throughout, Janice Haaken registers a resolute and decisive refusal to muffle the complexity of women's sexual experiences. We women, she argues, can acknowledge the distortions, defenses, and disguises that accompany our perceptions and consciousness, but still assert the authority to speak.

Plaster saint

by Nina Auerbach

Anne Frank, the Biography, by Melissa Müller, translated by Rita and Robert Kimber. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co., 1998, 318 pp., $23.00 hardcover.

When I was Anne Frank's age, I hated Anne Frank, and so did other disaffected American Jewish girls in the 1950s; but some of us used her too, to escape from lives we thought were awful, and for this callowness I still cringe. The most beautiful girl in my high school class escaped from our hated school by having a nervous breakdown when she failed, after many screen tests, to be cast as Anne in the movie; I mimicked her a few years later by reading excerpts from the *Diary* at a Senior Citizens home, thereby escaping our high school graduation party. The old people wept over Anne's yearning innocence, and mine as well, while I felt faintly foolish and vaguely guilty reading these simpy words.

Now that Anne Frank is old enough to be annotated, collated, appropriated and decried, I think we were right to hate her (or what she represented) in the 1950s, but after so many years of sanctification and resistance, I'd like to begin to know her. Melissa Müller's biography is welcome, even though it doesn't replace, or even supplement, the girl who haunted my generation of Jews.

I first read Anne Frank's diary in my Reform Jewish Sunday School when I was eleven or twelve, Anne's age when she began the diary. I had gone to Sunday School, despite my secular parents' horror, because I wanted to read the Bible and learn about the past. Instead, as I remember, we read only Anne Frank, and all we did was sigh over her. There she was, every Sunday, trilling inspiration. I hated her because I wanted to learn history, not current events (as we used to call the Holocaust), and also because her diary was more famous than anything I could write.

She was lucky she was killed, I thought evilly; everyone loves a dead girl and genuflects to her brilliance. In that, I think I was right. Alive, she seems to have been a pest; she begins her final diary entry with the admission that "most people can't stand me," and at close quarters she must indeed have been unbearable. Moreover, now that I've read the expanded, so-called definitive edition of the diary—which, as Müller shows, is not definitive—I think that had Anne lived to become the journalist she wanted to be, her comic (and strongest) voice might have flattened into jocularity, while her idealistic interludes would have revealed themselves as hollow. Because she was young and she died, though, they shine.

In the 1950s, she was everybody's bright child: she seemed to conform to everything girls were supposed to be. Before she went into hiding, she was boy-crazy; crammed in with two families and an insufferable dentist, she remained unremittingly male-identified. When the diary first appeared, it seemed normal that she hated her mother and older sister Margot while revering her father and pursuing Peter, the lumpish boy next door (her delightful, polymorphous obsession with sex didn't make the 1950s edition). Today, though, her animus against women seems startling, and, in the light of Nazi sex-segregation, especially tragic. At Auschwitz, Otto Frank and Peter vanished into the men's block, while Anne, her mother and sister became "an inseparable trio." When Anne and Margot were transferred to Bergen-Belsen, they clung together until they died.

Was Anne's degradation intensified or alleviated by her relegation to the company of women? We know only that when she thought she could choose, she took her identity, and often her language, from the teen magazines her protectors smuggled into the Annex. "Isn't it an important day for every girl when she gets her first kiss?" she burbles in words that made me wince when I first read them, in part because they were close to my own affectations. Now, this attitudinizing obedience to clichés about girls seems deeply sad, and not only for girls in hiding.

"Yet I cling to [my ideals] because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart," she wrote in her diary. This was the cant phrase that made my flesh creep. When the *Diary* was first published, and then adapted for the theatre and film, it became Anne's signature line. I see now that Anne herself didn't believe these radiant words. Her diary gives no quarter, either to Nazis or Jews; she depicts the Secret Annex as a haven of hate, with no bedrock of solidarity, political, religious, or humane. Even the entry that follows the famous sentence recants it with a sly sardonic whiff: "Still, you've probably noticed that I'm telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. For once, I'm not rattling on about high ideals." Inexhaustibly self-conscious, fiercely ambitious, Anne adopted many voices, but her view of humanity was so essentially grim that I like to think she too would have hated the Anne Frank we read in the 1950s.

Melissa Müller never speculates about what it felt like to be Anne; she describes her subject from without, in adjectives like "fun-loving," "combative," "idealistic but not naive." With an over-insistence worthy of Steven Spielberg, she keeps telling us how evil the Nazis were; even the soldier who comes to arrest the Franks is "short and horribly fat." With the exception of two entries unpublished even in the definitive edition, much of Müller's material can be found in the diary itself and in the moving 1995 documentary, *Anne Frank Remembered*. Müller tells us little new about the Frank family, and her Anne, though more turbulent than the saint of stage and cinema, is softer than the diary's angry inmate.

Anne's ambition is muted in this biography. She revised most of the diary, the so-called *b* text, for publication after the war. Her aim was less confessional than commercial, for she hoped to make her name with an amusing account of life in hiding. Apparently she came to blaze with the idea that incarceration would bring her fame, but her family responded with fond condescension. In one of her rare criticisms of her father, she writes, in Müller's translation: "[Daddy] hasn't realized that for me the fight to get on top was more important than anything else."

This is a thorny sentence. In the most recent translation of the *Diary*, it reads innocuously, "this struggle to triumph over my difficulties was more important to me than anything else." Müller's translation feels closer to Anne's tough spirit, but her analysis softens the battle cry: "'To get on top'—what that meant for Anne was finally to be taken seriously." Perhaps, but it also means to triumph over everyone, both the Nazis and her paternalistic family. Anne did that by becoming the shining saint of the Holocaust and turning the other residents of the Annex into fools.

She didn't spare her father, but since Otto Frank alone survived, he went to great lengths, as Müller shows, to suppress two sharp passages about himself—ungallantly, since he allowed Anne's attacks on everyone else in the Annex, including his wife, to survive. Even after Otto's death, the Anne Frank Foundation forbade Müller to quote these suppressed passages, presumably to protect his saintly reputation. Both entries deal with the hypocrisy of his marriage.

The first passage reveals Otto's lost love, whom he wasn't rich enough to marry; the second exposes his marriage of convenience to Anne's mother, who was driven inward by Otto's emotional inaccessibility. Müller sees in this expurgated passage "a record of Anne's growing sympathy for her mother," a sympathy her father intercepted in life and in death, but it seems rather a knowing anatomy of a marriage commonplace at that time, the sort of marriage girls like Anne vowed never to make.

Müller doesn't give us a surprising Anne, but she does, inadvertently I think, expose the fraudulence of Anne's role today. Most of this biography dwells, not on Anne Frank, but on the conditions that drove her into hiding, debasement and death, bearing witness at length to the fiendishly gradual legislation against Holland's Jews, to the fates of the Franks' relatives and friends, of Margot and Anne's schoolmates.

But before the Franks went into hiding, they kept secret from Anne the worst attacks on Jews; in hiding, as she knew well, she was more sheltered still. For better or worse, the Franks lived an uncommonly regular domestic life. Unlike most families in hiding, they lived all together in comparatively spacious quarters, protected by a devoted quartet of former employees, not by mercenary strangers. When Anne Frank did confront the Holocaust, she lost her diary and her voice. The injustice that clings to her is not simply her dreadful death, but the fact that a girl who was allowed to know so little has been chosen to speak for so many.